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MDHHS Contact: Lynn Sutfin, Sutfinl1@michigan.gov, 517-241-2112

EGLE Media Office, EGLE-Assist@Michigan.gov, 517-284-9278

State of Michigan increases availability of free bottled water for Benton Harbor city residents, recommends use out of an abundance of caution as efforts accelerate to address lead levels

Federal, state, local and community agencies' efforts accelerated to provide increased bottled water, educate public and replace aging drinking water infrastructure

LANSING, Mich. – Out of an abundance of caution to help ensure the health and safety of Benton Harbor city residents, the availability of bottled water is being expanded in the city and residents are being encouraged to use bottled water for cooking, drinking, brushing teeth, rinsing foods and mixing powdered infant formula. This acceleration is part of a longer-term effort to eliminate exceedances of the federal lead standard, educate the community on the effects of lead in drinking water, remove lead service lines and increase confidence in filtered water from the tap.

“Protecting the health and safety of Benton Harbor residents is a top priority,” said Elizabeth Hertel, director of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. “We’ve listened to the community’s concerns and out of an abundance of caution, we are recommending that residents use bottled water for cooking, drinking and brushing teeth.”

The EPA is conducting a filter effectiveness study to gather data and provide confidence in the effectiveness of water filters to reduce lead in drinking water. The study is being conducted as an assurance measure and free bottled water will be provided as long as needed. Further information on the completion date of the study will be shared by EPA when available.

Unfiltered tap water can be used for showering or bathing, for washing hands, dishes, clothes and for cleaning.

To date, more than 4,500 cases of bottled water have been delivered to the city of Benton Harbor through a local-state partnership. Another 15,500 cases are being delivered to city distribution centers in the coming days, with expanded delivery to continue to ensure that all residents have access to bottled water during this time.

Distribution dates, locations and times include:

- Southwest Michigan Community Action Agency (CAA), 331 Miller St., Benton Harbor
 - Thursday, Oct. 7 from 4 to 6 p.m.
- God's Household of Faith, 275 Pipestone, Benton Harbor
 - Friday, Oct. 8 from 2 to 6 p.m.

Additional dates and locations for bottled water pick up will be added to make sure community needs are met. Information will be posted on Michigan.gov/MiLeadSafe.

Residents who are unable to pick up water and/or require water delivery should call 800-815-5485 to schedule drop-offs.

For questions about lead, MDHHS can be reached at 866-691-5323 Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"We look forward to continued partnerships with the local community as we continue to ramp up resources," Hertel added. "Community trust and partnerships are critical components of our efforts in the city."

This action is part of an accelerated, across-the-board effort to reduce the risk of exposure to lead in drinking water while the city replaces all lead service lines. This collaborative effort includes the City of Benton Harbor, the Berrien County Health Department, local community organizations, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy.

It is important that residents continue to use tap water and keep water moving through the pipes in their homes, and the city's distribution system, because water stagnation due to reduced usage can cause a number of water quality problems in addition to lead exceedances. Maintaining good water quality can be accomplished by flushing water/running water at the faucet or bathtub for five minutes each morning or after the water has not been used for six hours or more. Activities that are considered flushing include running the washing machine or taking a shower. If a home has a lead service line, this will move water that has been sitting in the lead line through the system, bringing cold fresh water out of the distribution system to the home.

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